

# Who wore jewellery in Roman London?

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**I**t is easy to assume that the Roman past was just like yesterday's Britain, when gender divisions were clearly advertised in dress and no self-respecting man would be seen wearing jewellery. But when Lacey Wallace investigated who was adorned with what in the tombs from Roman London she discovered a rather different picture.

When Roman archaeologists find items that point to the adornment of the body, things like hairpins, earrings, finger rings, bracelets, and certain kinds of 'feminine' brooches, they almost always assume they were worn by women. Men in the past, they think, wore – and were buried with – belts and buckles, signet rings, and heavy cloak-brooches, but not bracelets, beaded necklaces, or earrings (except for those very un-Roman men in the east of the Empire). If archaeologists think they need evidence at all for what men wore, they look to literature written by men and to fresco paintings from the central area of the Empire, and to the, rather rare, stone funerary reliefs from France, Germany (right), and England.

But what happens when we look at what we find in the burials themselves? Study of 911 of the recently excavated burials from Roman London yielded surprising results. It is not the females that were most frequently buried with artefacts of adornment, it is children between the ages of six and eighteen (but not yet fully grown). And although grown men's burials did not often contain items of adornment, some rather surprising objects were found associated with males.

## What's the difference between toddlers and infants?

Funerary reliefs depict infants, toddlers, and older children all as miniature adults. But in Roman London infants, toddlers, and older children are all treated differently. In pre-industrial and developing countries, it is regular to find around 100 infant deaths per 1000 births. But in Roman London only one out of all 911 burials was that of a newborn infant. Clearly, the population in London during the Roman period cannot have been burying infants who died – at least not in the planned cemeteries where all other

members of society ended up. And since burials in houses or backyards are rare indeed, it seems that people were discarding dead babies in a completely different way. Depositing them in the Thames? Burning their bodies and scattering the ashes?

Toddlers, however, do appear in the cemeteries that surrounded the town, which were organized alongside the roads outside the settlement area and city wall. But children, up to five years old, were never buried with items of adornment. Clearly, living to become a toddler gave the child a recognized place in society, but it did not mean that they were given jewellery or dress items of any kind. These children had lived long enough to be given names and become recognized as individuals in their families, and yet they were somehow still very different from children aged six and over.

## The promise of the child

Children (unfortunately we can-not tell from their bones whether they were boys or girls) who died when aged between six and twelve were those most often buried with items of adornment (p. 7, top left). Clearly, in the minds of Roman Londoners, something changed dramatically at around the age of six. Older children, from thirteen to eighteen, still received more items of adornment than adults, but only half as much as their younger siblings.

So, did Roman Londoners love their six- to twelve-year-olds more than their younger and older children? Did they believe they were going to hold a different place in the afterlife? Was their death somehow more tragic? Some think that children wearing bracelets and beads in burial are girls who are dressed for symbolic virgin sacrifice or mock-marriage to the gods. There is no way to

say from the bones whether they were girls, however, and to argue that their adornment tells us they are girls and the fact that they are girls tells us how to interpret the adornment is a circular argument with no way out.

It would not be surprising if children died at birth so often that they could not be mourned fully or else parents across the city would have all gone mad with grief. For the same reason, the deaths of children aged six or older, who had given their parents hope that they would survive to adulthood, were all the more distressing for being unexpected. Such children were old enough to have developed personalities but not yet of 'that troublesome age', adolescence, and so perhaps their deaths were conceived of as more tragic. But such an explanation hardly accounts for why they in particular should be buried with items of adornment.

The types of bracelets, earrings, rings, and necklaces the children were buried wearing are not very different in size or character from the types of adornment adults in the same cemeteries were buried with. We might reasonably expect that children's jewellery or dress would be different from adults', as it generally is today, especially in size. So perhaps these objects did not belong to the children and were instead gifts from parents and relatives, perhaps tokens of affection meant to alleviate grief or for the child to take to the afterlife. People were probably dressed differently for death than for life. These objects can reasonably be interpreted as ritual offerings, imbued with religious and social meaning by the living as they placed them with the child in the grave.

## Manly men

There are more surprises when we look at what was buried with adult males. Males were far less frequently buried with items of adornment than were females or children, but not only are bracelets present in male graves in London, but in one case a man was buried wearing a glass-bead anklet (right) – a love token from a grieving widow? To find an anklet on a male skeleton is shocking enough, for it to be

made of beads is truly exceptional. And that is not the only burial of note; another man was buried with a jet and glass bead necklace, a copper-alloy bracelet, and a jet Medusa pendant (above right), and yet others with bracelets, a finger ring, and beads. There are men buried with what is traditionally considered masculine adornment – heavy crossbow brooches (top right) and belt buckles (below) – but they are outnumbered by those with bracelets, beads, and finger rings. It can hardly be that these objects were the possessions of female family members placed in the burial as gifts or mourning tokens, since many of these items are worn on the male bodies, not just placed in the grave.

Anyone walking down the street in London nowadays would be hard-pressed to say that men do not wear earrings, bracelets, or beads, and we must completely rethink the assumption that it was different in antiquity. Literary and artistic sources and conservative modern analogy may not be the best guides to everyday practice in antiquity. Archaeology, of course, has its own complex biases, but as a source of evidence that is deposited by different kinds of people with different social statuses, ages, genders, and group associations, it has far more chance of revealing what the whole range of the population was doing. It is time to rethink not only Roman, but also our own, gender and age classifications, values, and stereotypes.

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